

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

---

Volume 1  
Issue 34 Fall 2021

Article 5

---

September 2021

## Learning to Value My Ideas and Take Control of My Education

Kundala G. Shankar  
*National University of Singapore*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>

Digital Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Network

---

Logo

### Recommended Citation

Shankar, Kundala G. "Learning to Value My Ideas and Take Control of My Education," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 34 (2021), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss34/5>

## LEARNING TO VALUE MY IDEAS AND TAKE CONTROL OF MY EDUCATION

*Kundala Gayathri Shankar, National University of Singapore, Class of 2023*

When I agreed to help Professor Lynette refine her module [course], “[Committed to Changing their World: The Systems Pioneers](#),” at National University of Singapore, I expected to be asked a rigid list of questions about my assignments and experience. Instead, we sat down for an hour and had an unscripted discussion about a variety of subjects. We discussed how the module was constructed, the technologies used by students enrolled, the topics covered, as well as my thoughts and ideas about all of these. As an Engineering student attempting to connect my scientific, systematic curriculum to this module covering philosophies and global issues, I shared my perspective of having to find a connection between this module and what I wanted to learn in university. As I shared my experience, this open and honest dialogue made me feel more at ease in sharing and being heard in my concerns. I realized that this session could stand to benefit both of us. What I expected to be a one-sided interaction turned out to be a deep conversation that had a profound impact on me.

This personal conversation made it easier for me to connect with Professor Lynette. I felt more at ease discussing topics that were important to me and that I wished were covered in the curriculum. As someone raised in a conservative Asian society, I would usually avoid discussing taboo topics or anything heavily sociopolitical, such as equality, LGBTQ, race, mental health, and so on. I would especially avoid discussing these topics with my teachers or professors as they would often not share the same standpoint as me given the difference in age and environment we were raised in. Simply by freely sharing her own thoughts and opinions regarding these taboo topics that I identified with, Professor Lynette normalized being honest regarding our personal views in the classroom. This helped create a trusting environment in this smaller conversation. As a result, I was more willing to discuss these topics and share my thoughts seeing as my contributions would be valued rather than mocked.

Since there were no other students or faculty members around, I was able to form a personal connection with Professor Lynette. This reduced the need for me to avoid sociopolitical topics where I would normally be concerned about what other students or faculty thought of my viewpoints. By establishing a rapport with Professor Lynette and having her foster an environment of trust and non-judgment, I was willing to raise social issues that I felt the module should have addressed, such as inequality. As a woman of a racial minority living in Singapore, I have always been aware of the existence of inequality in the city-state and around the world. While my friends and I have discussed these social issues in private, we have rarely seen them represented in our education. However, Professor Lynette did not shy away from discussing such social issues with us students. She even made herself available after each class to talk about everyday life and our personal struggles as students. Because of the environment Professor Lynette created, I felt able, as a student working in partnership with her on the module, to enact my agency through this collaboration and voice the need to address inequality through this module that discussed global issues.

Through my collaboration with Professor Lynette, I learned to trust myself and look for ways to improve how we learned certain topics in this module. I remembered an experience in an entrepreneurship module where student-led discussions were used as a form of teaching. In that module, we pitched and defended product ideas to classmates. Students were more engaged with the material when they were less reliant on the professor to provide structure to the discussion. Experiencing this teaching style from my home major gave me ideas for changing the module structure I was working on with Professor Lynette. I proposed having student-led discussions and allowing students to vote on which topics they wanted to be covered in the module. I believed that allowing students to play an active role in selecting their curriculum would allow them to develop agency in their learning. Professor Lynette implemented this “pitch” concept in her module to allow students to debate and choose topics for assignments. By fostering agentic engagement not only in me but also in her students through collaborating with students from various backgrounds, Professor Lynette was able to capitalize on our experiences in other modules to improve how she designed this one.

Another advantage of supporting agentic engagement in students is that it allows educators to bridge the communication gap between teachers and students. We must acknowledge that our experiences as students and professors are not the same. Thus, interacting with students in ways that recognize them as agents in their learning allows professors to see the module through the eyes of a student. At the time that I worked with Professor Lynette, I was juggling seven modules and leadership commitments while my professor was only teaching me this module. Every individual assignment weighed heavily on me. As a result, I recognized the importance of each assignment being meaningful and contributing to my learning. Instead of having many assignments that simply regurgitated what I had already learned, I felt that assignments should focus on students' reflection. This would enable us to engage with topics on a more in-depth level. As a student receiving all of these assignments and projects, I emphasized the importance of realigning the coursework so that each assignment added value to my education. Furthermore, because I interacted with my peers on a daily basis, I was able to understand and identify with their concerns about this module. As a student, I was better suited to open conversations with friends in the absence of a professor. I could effectively juxtapose their concerns with my lived experience in the module, and communicate these thoughts and ideas to Professor Lynette. Throughout our collaboration, I experienced formative growth as I learned to be more confident about representing my classmates' concerns and developing ideas for improving the module.

By developing a rapport with Professor Lynette, I was able to make deeper connections, make suggestions, and contribute ideas. Having an authority figure in the classroom value my ideas and address my concerns instilled confidence in me. Professor Lynette took the time to inform the students who took part in this discussion about the changes she made to her module in response to our feedback. I felt like I was an active participant in my education and developed a sense of agentic engagement as a result. Professor Lynette helped me in developing agency by validating my thoughts and ideas. I felt more comfortable expressing myself in future academic projects, as well as outside of the classroom. Professor Lynette sent a message to participating students that our ideas and motivations are productive by addressing our concerns and providing feedback and updates on how our ideas were reflected in the changed curriculum.

This collaboration demonstrated to me that I had the agency to choose what and how I would learn new things. Having to formulate and adapt my analytical skills to come up with ideas for changing a module had made me more adaptable and invested in effective learning. I took the initiative to look for alternative courses to learn new coding languages that would be difficult to learn in my current curriculum. The collaboration with Professor Lynette served as a solid foundation for what I hoped to gain from my future studies. I spent time emailing coding instructors and speaking with senior engineers to determine what skills I needed to learn to thrive in my career. Having gained a sense of agentic engagement with Professor Lynette, I was able to gain confidence in seeking out alternative resources and mentors in my home major.

Seeing my suggestions in this partnership come to fruition reduced my apprehension about voicing ideas and thoughts to authority figures. As an intern, I worked at a start-up over the summer. My understanding of engineering and entrepreneurship aided me in devising novel processes to improve the efficiency of the business. Working with Professor Lynette taught me that, even as a student, I had something valuable to contribute to the company. When I made suggestions to my bosses, my ideas remained grounded in reality and emphasized my distinct point of view. It seemed intimidating to tell these experienced professionals that I thought I could provide a better solution. Nonetheless, my evolving experience in this partnership served as a reminder of the value of having diverse perspectives when developing plans. Developing agentic engagement is critical for the development of students' autonomy. This is especially important in universities, which serve as a bridge between us and the workforce. Through pedagogical partnerships, like the one I experienced with Professor Lynette, students can cultivate personal interests and deeper thinking in a safe environment. Collaboration broadens students' thinking and motivates them to engage in their work for the sake of deeper learning rather than grades. Students must remember that our age does not limit the quality of our ideas or the impact they can have on society. We can more easily learn and believe in ourselves when we have the opportunity to develop agentic engagement.

This unique position of advocating for my classmates' concerns and worries ensured that we had a meaningful learning experience. I could provide a shift in focus for lesson content to ensure fellow students' interests were represented in the classroom. But, the most impactful aspect of this pedagogical partnership was the autonomy I gained. The agency I developed in this partnership will last beyond my time in university. Professor Lynette's confidence in my ideas inspired me to step up in my career.

## Reference

Tan, L. Y. L., Chung, R. R. C., Low, K. J., Shankar, K. G., & Mun, G. Q. Y. (2021, April 21). Co-creating module design with students: Improving content, assessment and technologies. *Teaching Connections*. <https://blog.nus.edu.sg/teachingconnections/2021/04/21/co-creating-module-design-with-students-improving-content-assessment-and-technologies/>